

Choosing

—"The daylight holds you close, but tonight you are mine."

The Technicolors - Tonight You Are Mine

Est

The coffee was terrible.

I mean, objectively speaking, it was probably fine—the kind of mass-produced convenience store blend that millions of people drank every day without complaint. But William had handed it to me like he was presenting a sacred offering, his expression carrying that particular nervousness of someone who was very aware they were doing something significant and very unsure if they were doing it right.

"It's not good coffee," he said, before I'd even taken a sip. "I know it's not good coffee. The café I wanted to take you to was closed, and then the second one I tried had a line that wrapped around the block, and by the third option I was starting to panic, so I just—"

"William."

"—bought something from the 7-Eleven near my building, which is possibly the least romantic thing I could have done, but I promised I would ask you for coffee and I didn't want to break the promise even if—"

"William."

He stopped mid-ramble, his eyes wide.

"It's perfect." I said.

"It's in a plastic cup."

"I noticed."

"With a cartoon character on the side."

I looked at the cup. There was, indeed, a cartoon character—some kind of cheerful penguin holding what appeared to be a smaller, equally cheerful penguin. The marketing strategy was unclear, but the execution was enthusiastic.

"I like penguins." I said.

"You're lying to make me feel better."

"I'm not lying. Penguins are very photogenic. Did you know they mate for life?"

William stared at me. "Are you—is that a metaphor?"

"It's a fact about penguins. I did a wildlife photography elective in university. We studied Antarctic species."

"I can't tell if you're being serious."

"I'm always serious about penguins."

A laugh escaped him—surprised, genuine, the kind of laugh that transformed his whole face. For a moment, he looked like someone who hadn't spent three years in isolation. Someone who had always known how to laugh at absurd conversations about convenience store coffee.

"Drink your terrible coffee," he said. "Before it gets cold and becomes even more terrible."

I took a sip. It was, as promised, not good. But William was watching me with that expression—hopeful and uncertain—and the warmth that spread through my chest had nothing to do with the temperature of the beverage.

"Perfect." I repeated.

"Liar."

"Optimist."

"Those are not the same thing."

"They're closer than you'd think."

We were standing outside my apartment building, in the small courtyard where residents sometimes gathered to smoke or gossip or wait for taxis. It was not a romantic location. The lighting was harsh, the concrete was cracked, and somewhere in the distance a motorcycle was backfiring repeatedly like it had a personal vendetta against peace and quiet. But William was here. He'd come to my building, bought me coffee, terrible coffee, in a plastic cup, with penguins, and was now standing in my unromantic courtyard looking like he might combust from nervousness.

It was, somehow, the most romantic thing that had ever happened to me.

"I wanted to ask you something," William said. "Before we go to the house."

"You're already asking me to the house. That seems like a big enough ask."

"This is different." He fidgeted with his own coffee cup—also plastic, also penguin-themed, probably also terrible. "I want you to know that you can say no. To any of it. The house, the renovation project, the—" He gestured vaguely. "Whatever this is

we're doing."

"I know I can say no."

"I just want to make sure you're not doing this because you feel obligated. Because of the exhibition, or the photography, or—"

"William." I reached out and touched his arm—the same gesture from the gallery, the one that had lasted longer than it should. "I'm here because I want to be here. Not because of obligation. Not because of professional duty. Because I want to see your mother's house. Because I want to understand this part of you."

He looked at my hand on his arm. Then back at my face.

"Okay." he said softly.

"Okay."

"We should go, then. Before I lose my nerve and suggest we stay here drinking terrible coffee forever."

"Would that be so bad?"

"The coffee would eventually run out. And then we'd just be standing in your courtyard for no reason."

"I can think of worse fates."

His smile was small but real. "Can you?"

"I have a very good imagination."

The taxi ride to William's mother's house took us through parts of Bangkok I rarely visited.

The city changed character as we moved away from the modern developments where I lived—the gleaming towers and chain restaurants giving way to older neighborhoods with narrower streets and buildings that showed their age in faded paint and weathered shutters. Trees grew in unexpected places, their roots breaking through concrete, their branches reaching toward the sky like they were trying to escape the urban landscape.

William was quiet during the drive, watching the scenery pass with an expression I couldn't quite read. His hands were clasped in his lap, his posture more tense than it had been in my courtyard.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Nervous." He didn't look at me. "I haven't brought anyone here yet. Besides Lego and my father. This is—"

"New."

"Yes."

"We can turn around. If you're not ready."

Now he looked at me, surprise flickering across his features. "You'd do that?"

"Of course. This is your space, William. Your mother's space. You get to decide who sees it and when."

He was quiet for a moment, processing this.

"No," he said finally. "I want you to see it. I'm just—nervous about wanting it."

"I understand that."

"Do you?"

"More than you'd think."

The taxi turned onto a smaller street, and the buildings became houses—actual houses, with gardens and gates and the particular character of spaces that had been lived in for decades. This was old Bangkok, the Bangkok that existed before the skyscrapers and the shopping malls, when neighborhoods were neighborhoods and families stayed for generations.

"There," William said, pointing. "The one with the frangipani tree."

The driver stopped, and we got out. I found myself standing in front of a house that looked like it had stepped out of another era—traditional architecture softened by time, walls that had once been bright now faded to gentle pastels, a garden that was clearly in the middle of being rescued from years of neglect.

William stood beside me, his tension radiating through the air between us.

"It's not finished," he said quickly. "Nothing works properly yet. The garden is still a disaster. The contractors have only been here a week, and there's—"

"I didn't come for a finished product."

He stopped. Looked at me.

"What did you come for?"

"This," I said simply. "You. The story of this place. Whatever you want to show me."

Something shifted in his expression—the nervousness giving way to something softer.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Let's—let me show you."

The interior of the house was a study in transition. Some rooms were still frozen in time—furniture covered with dust cloths, windows shuttered against the light, the particular stillness of spaces that had been waiting for someone to return. Others showed signs of recent activity: contractor equipment stacked in corners, protective tarps covering floors, the skeletal beginnings of renovation projects that would eventually transform the space.

William walked me through it slowly, narrating as we went.

"This was the living room. My mother hosted everything here—book clubs, holiday gatherings, the parties she threw for my exhibitions." He pointed toward a bay window, currently covered with plastic sheeting. "That window seat was my favorite place in the house. I used to curl up there with a book and ignore everyone for hours."

"You? Antisocial? I'm shocked."

"I was an introverted child. It developed into full hermit as an adult."

"Character evolution."

"That's one way to put it."

I raised my camera—instinct, the same instinct that had been driving me for years. Capture the moment. Preserve what might otherwise be lost. My shutter clicked before I could second-guess myself.

William noticed. Paused.

"You're photographing," he said. It wasn't an accusation, just an observation.

"Sorry—I should have asked. I can—"

"No. It's fine." He watched me adjust my lens. "It's what you do. You see things, and you record them. I understand the impulse."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure." A slight smile. "Besides, this is supposed to be a documentation project, isn't it? The restoration process. Before and after."

"This would be the 'before' stage, then."

"Very much the 'before.'" He gestured for me to follow him. "Come. I want to show

you my mother's reading corner."

We moved through the house—past a kitchen that had been gutted to its bones, through a hallway lined with empty spaces where pictures had once hung, into a smaller room at the back that still held traces of who had lived here.

The reading corner was exactly what you'd imagine: a built-in window seat beneath a curved window, with shelves on either side that had once held books. The cushions were gone, the upholstery faded to shadows of its original color, but the bones were beautiful—carved wood, careful craftsmanship, the kind of detail that people didn't bother with anymore.

"She spent hours here," William said, his voice soft. "Every afternoon, she'd make tea and settle into this corner with whatever novel she was obsessed with that week. I remember coming home from school and finding her here, so lost in a story that she didn't hear me calling."

"It sounds peaceful."

"It was. This room always felt—safe. Contained." He ran his hand along the window frame. "I want to restore it exactly as it was. The window seat, the shelves, the specific shade of blue she painted the trim. I found samples in the basement."

I photographed the space—the window seat in its current state, the light filtering through dusty glass, William's hand against the carved wood. Each image told part of a story that was still being written.

"The tiles in the kitchen," I said. "You mentioned they're original?"

"Hand-painted. By my grandmother, actually. She was an artist before she was a mother." William smiled slightly. "It runs in the family."

"The art or the stubbornness?"

"Both. They're related qualities."

We continued through the house, William pointing out details I would never have noticed on my own—the spot where his height had been marked on the doorframe every birthday, the closet where his mother had hidden birthday presents badly enough that he always found them, the bathroom where he'd tried to give himself a haircut at age seven with predictably disastrous results.

Each story added another layer to my understanding of who he was. Not the reclusive artist, not the broken genius—just a person who had grown up in this house, loved and been loved, and was now trying to find his way back to something he'd lost.

"There's one more thing," he said, as we completed the circuit. "The most important

thing. But it's outside."

"The garden?"

"The garden."

Lego had been working miracles. That was the only explanation for what I saw when William led me out the back door and into what had once been a disaster area of overgrown weeds and neglected flower beds. The transformation wasn't complete—couldn't be complete in just a few weeks—but the progress was visible everywhere.

Paths had been cleared through the tangle, revealing stone walkways that curved gracefully through the space. Flower beds had been weeded and prepared, dark soil waiting for new plantings. A small pond that had been choked with algae was now clean enough to reflect the sky, its edges lined with fresh stones.

And in the center of it all, magnificent and impossible, stood a frangipani tree.

"It survived," William said, watching my face. "Three years without care. The gardener I hired said it should have died, that frangipani need regular attention, that the lack of pruning alone should have killed it. But here it is."

I stared at the tree. It wasn't large—maybe twice my height—but it was alive. Really, vibrantly alive. White blossoms clustered among dark green leaves, their fragrance drifting through the afternoon air.

"It survived all those years without care." I said softly.

William's voice was equally soft. "Some things are resilient like that."

The subtext was deafening.

"My mother planted it when I was born," he continued. "She said it would grow up with me. That our fates were connected—the tree and the boy. When she got sick, I used to come out here and just—sit with it. Like maybe if the tree was still alive, she would be too."

"William..."

"It didn't work, obviously. She died anyway. But the tree—" He stopped, his voice catching. "The tree is still here. And I think maybe that means something. Not that I was wrong to hope, but that hope itself is resilient. That it survives even when the thing you hoped for doesn't."

I didn't know what to say. There were no words adequate to the weight of what he was sharing.

So I photographed instead.

The tree from multiple angles. The blossoms catching light. William standing beside it, his hand on the trunk, his expression carrying all the complicated grief of someone who had lost and was still learning to live with that loss.

"Lego wants to plant new things," William said, pulling himself back from wherever he'd gone. "He has plans—elaborate plans, involving color palettes and seasonal blooming schedules and something called 'companion planting' that I don't fully understand."

"That sounds very Lego."

"It does." William smiled slightly. "He asked me what I wanted to add. What new plants I wanted to choose."

"And?"

"I didn't know. I've never been good with growing things. That was my mother's domain."

"You could learn."

"That's what Lego said. He's been giving me assignments. Researching what thrives in this soil, what needs full sun versus shade, which plants would attract the kind of butterflies my mother loved."

"Is that why there are seed packets on the porch?"

William followed my gaze to the back porch, where a small collection of gardening supplies had been arranged with obvious care. Seed packets, small pots, a bag of soil.

"He left those yesterday," William said. "Instructions included. I'm supposed to start seedlings while the contractors work on the interior."

"Have you?"

"Not yet. I've been—" He paused. "Nervous about it."

"About planting seeds?"

"About starting something new. About committing to growth when I don't know if I can follow through."

I looked at the seed packets, then back at William.

"You're afraid of failure," I said. "Not of the seeds. Of what it would mean if they didn't grow."



He met my eyes. "Is that obvious?"

"It's familiar."

We stood in silence for a moment, the garden spreading around us in its state of partial transformation. Somewhere nearby, birds were singing—the particular soundtrack of a space returning to life.

"What if we did it together?" I said.

"Did what?"

"Planted something. Right now. You and me." I gestured at the supplies. "It doesn't have to be anything complicated. Just—one thing. A start."

William looked at the seed packets. Then at me. Then back at the garden.

"You'd do that?"

"I'd like to."

"Why?"

"Because—" I searched for the right words. "Because you're trying to bring something back to life. And I think maybe that's easier when you're not doing it alone."

Something shifted in his expression. Vulnerability, layered over something that might have been hope.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. Let's plant something."

We chose marigolds. Not because they were significant or meaningful or carried any particular symbolism—we chose them because the packet said they were "nearly impossible to kill," which seemed like a reasonable starting point for two people with no gardening experience.

"The instructions say to plant them half an inch deep," William said, reading the back of the packet with the intense focus he usually reserved for his art. "And space them six inches apart."

"Do we have something to measure with?"

"Lego left a ruler. Of course Lego left a ruler."

We worked together in the late afternoon light, filling small pots with soil, making careful indentations with our fingers, placing seeds with more precision than was

probably necessary. William's hands were covered in dirt within minutes—the same hands that created masterpieces in oil paint, now fumbling with paper packets and plastic containers.

"I have no idea what I'm doing," he admitted.

"Neither do I."

"Is this right? This depth?"

"I think so? The picture shows—here, look."

I showed him the diagram on the packet, and he squinted at it like it held the secrets of the universe.

"That could be anything," he said. "That could be a mushroom."

"It's clearly a seedling."

"It's clearly an abstract concept with delusions of botanical accuracy."

I laughed. Couldn't help it. The absurdity of the situation—two adults debating the iconography of a marigold seed packet in an overgrown garden—was too much.

William looked at me, startled by the sound. Then a smile spread across his face, slow and real.

"You're laughing at me."

"I'm laughing with you. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

"I'll explain it after we successfully grow something."

We finished planting the seeds—a row of small pots lined up on the porch, each one labeled in William's careful handwriting. The sun was beginning to set, painting the garden in shades of gold and amber that made everything look softer, more forgiving.

"Now we wait." William said, looking at our work.

"The hardest part."

"I'm not good at waiting."

"Neither am I."

We sat on the porch, side by side, looking out at the garden. The frangipani tree cast long shadows across the overgrown grass. Somewhere in the distance, the city

hummed with its endless noise, but here it felt separate. Peaceful. Like we'd stepped outside of time.

"I used to think this house was my mother," William said quietly. "That losing her meant losing this too. That I couldn't come back without falling apart."

"And now?"

"Now I think—" He paused, considering. "Now I think she's in what I do with it. How I bring it back to life. Not in the walls or the furniture, but in the act of caring for it. The attention. The intention."

"That makes sense."

"Does it?"

I turned to look at him. His profile was lit by the setting sun, his features softened by the golden light. He looked like something I might photograph. Something I might try to capture, knowing I could never fully succeed.

"It makes perfect sense," I said. "The dead live in our actions. In how we choose to carry them forward. Not in objects or places, but in what we do with the love they gave us."

William's eyes met mine.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

The air between us was charged with something I couldn't name—not quite tension, not quite anticipation. Something closer to awareness. The particular consciousness of being in proximity to someone you might kiss, if the moment was right.

The moment was right.

I could feel it—the natural pull toward him, the way my body wanted to lean in, to close the distance, to find out what it would be like to be that close. After months of texts and conversations and careful navigation, this felt like an opportunity. A door briefly open.

Neither of us moved.

Not because we didn't want to.

Because we weren't ready for it to be easy.

"Thank you." William said finally, his voice rough. "For coming here. For seeing this."

"Thank you for inviting me."

My hand found his arm—the same gesture, again, the one that was becoming familiar. His skin was warm beneath my fingers, dusted with dirt from our gardening project.

The touch lasted longer than it should.

Then I pulled away, and the moment ended, and we were two separate people again—connected but distinct, present but not quite together.

"I should go," I said. "It's getting late."

"I know." He stood, offering me his hand to help me up. Another touch. Another moment of contact that sent electricity through my skin. "I'll walk you out."

We walked through the house together, past the renovation chaos and the rooms waiting to be restored. At the front door, we stopped.

"Same time next week?" William asked. "If you want to see the progress."

"I'd like that."

"And the seedlings—I'll send you pictures. So you can see if we managed to keep them alive."

"I'll hold you to that."

He smiled—small, private, the kind of smile that felt like it was only for me.

"Goodnight, Est."

"Goodnight, William."

I walked to the street to find a taxi, my camera bag heavy on my shoulder, the scent of frangipani still clinging to my clothes. Behind me, I could feel William watching—could feel his attention like a physical weight, warm and uncertain and full of possibility.

I didn't look back.

Some things were better not photographed. Some moments were meant to exist only in memory—fragile and fleeting, beautiful precisely because they couldn't be captured.

My apartment felt smaller when I returned. Not literally—the walls hadn't moved, the furniture was exactly where I'd left it—but something had shifted. After the

openness of the garden, the high ceilings of the old house, my familiar space felt cramped. Contained in ways I hadn't noticed before.

I set down my camera bag and went through the motions of returning home: shoes off, lights on, the ritual check of the resurrection plant (still green, still thriving). The painting of my hands sat on its small table, catching the last light from the window.

My phone buzzed. A text from William.

William: The seedlings have been watered. Lego's instructions were very specific about initial hydration.

William: I have no idea if I did it right.

William: They haven't died yet. I'm choosing to see that as a victory.

I smiled despite myself.

Est: Give it time. Marigolds are resilient.

William: So you keep saying. I'm reserving judgment until we see actual growth.

William: Thank you again. For today. For—all of it.

Est: Thank you for showing me.

Est: The house is beautiful. What you're doing with it is beautiful.

A pause. Then:

William: Nobody's ever said that before. About the house or the work.

Est: Then everyone else was wrong.

William: Goodnight, Est.

Est: Goodnight, William.

I set down my phone and finally opened my laptop.

The screen lit up with notifications—the accumulated correspondence of a day spent away from technology. Most of it was routine: newsletters I never read, social media updates I didn't care about, the digital detritus of modern existence. But one email caught my eye.

From: Nut

Subject: URGENT - Opportunity you need to see

My heart rate picked up. Nut didn't use "urgent" lightly. In the months I'd known him, he'd maintained a professional calm that bordered on supernatural—nothing fazed him, nothing warranted panic, everything could be handled with appropriate scheduling and clear communication.

If he was using caps lock, it meant something.

I opened the email.

Est,

I know I said I'd stop sending you job leads because you're supposed to be focusing on the exhibition work, but this one came across my desk and I couldn't not forward it.

Something just came across my desk that I think you need to see. I know it's last minute and probably completely insane, but hear me out before you panic.

A management company representing a major K-pop group is looking for a photographer for their Asia tour. THREE MONTHS. Multiple countries. Hotels and flights fully covered, plus a day rate that made me double-check the numbers.

I know this is your dream. I've heard you talk about wanting to travel, wanting to photograph Asia, wanting to see everything you've only seen in other people's work. This could be it.

The timeline is tight—they need someone confirmed within the next three weeks. I've attached the full brief and contact info.

The contract includes rights to use your images for promotion, but you retain ownership for personal projects.

This is big, Est. This is the kind of opportunity that comes once.

I don't need an answer tonight. But I need one within the week if you're interested. Let me know and I'll set up a meeting Or if you want me to pretend I never sent this.

Either way, I'm here.

Nut

I read the email three times.

I stared at the email until the words started to blur.

Three months.

Multiple countries.

Hotels and flights covered.

This was it. This was the dream I'd been carrying since university—since before that, really, since I was a teenager with a borrowed camera, flipping through travel magazines and imagining myself capturing all those impossible places. I'd talked about it constantly, planned routes I never took, saved money that always got redirected to rent or equipment or the basic necessities of survival. And now it was here. An actual offer. An actual opportunity.

I scrolled to the attached brief and read it twice, then three times. The itinerary was extensive: Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia. Stadiums and behind-the-scenes moments. The kind of high-profile work that could launch a career into an entirely different stratosphere.

Everything I'd ever wanted.

I thought about the garden. About William's hands in the dirt, his careful attention to depth and spacing. The frangipani tree that had survived three years of neglect. The seedlings we'd planted together, small and fragile and full of potential.

Some things are resilient like that.

Could this fragile thing we were building survive three months apart?

We weren't even—we weren't anything yet. We were two people texting each other about coffee and seedlings, circling around something neither of us had named. There was no commitment to honor, no promise to break. If I took this job, I'd be leaving something that might have become something, not something that actually was. But that felt like rationalization. Like the kind of logic you used to justify doing what you wanted anyway.

I wanted to go.

God, I wanted to go. I wanted to wake up in different cities, to photograph things I'd never seen, to finally—finally—become the person I'd always imagined I could be. The photographer who traveled, who captured the world, who wasn't anchored to one place by fear or circumstance or the weight of things left undone.

And I wanted William.

I wanted the garden visits and the terrible coffee and the conversations that felt like discovering something new. I wanted to see the house transform, week by week, into something beautiful. I wanted to be there when the seedlings grew, if they grew, when the window seat was restored, when William walked through his mother's home and felt peace instead of grief.

Could I have both?

Could I choose myself and choose him?

Dr. Siriporn's words echoed in my mind: Has it occurred to you that choosing yourself might also mean choosing to be with someone? That the two aren't mutually exclusive? But this felt different. This felt like a choice that required choosing one thing over another—the dream or the relationship, the career or the connection. The chance I might never get again or the person I was just starting to know.

I picked up my phone and typed a message to Nut:

Est: Got the email. I need time to think about it. Can you send me more details? Timeline, specific requirements, anything else that might help me make a decision.

Est: And please don't mention this to anyone yet. I need to figure this out on my own first.

His response came quickly:

Nut: Of course. Sending additional info now. Take the time you need—the deadline isn't for three weeks.

Nut: And Est? Whatever you decide, I've got your back.

Est: Thanks, Nut.

I set down the phone and looked around my apartment.

The resurrection plant. The painting. The camera bag, still carrying equipment that had photographed William's house just hours ago. Evidence of a life I was building, a self I was becoming.

What did choosing myself look like now?

I didn't know. Couldn't know. Not yet.

The only thing I knew for certain was that I wasn't going to make this decision tonight. Not while the scent of frangipani still clung to my clothes, not while the memory of William's smile was fresh in my mind. Decisions made in the afterglow of good moments were rarely good decisions—they were emotional, reactive, driven by whatever feeling happened to be strongest in that instant.

I needed to think. To process. To figure out what I actually wanted, separate from what I felt in any particular moment.

I needed time.

But time was the one thing I might not have.



I didn't sleep well that night.

The email sat in my inbox like a small bomb, ticking quietly, demanding attention I wasn't ready to give. Every time I started to drift off, my mind would circle back to it—three months, multiple countries, the dream I'd been chasing for years finally within reach. And every time I thought about reaching for it, I saw William's face in the golden light of the garden. The way he'd smiled when we planted the seedlings. The way his voice had softened when he talked about his mother.

Some things are resilient like that.

At 3 AM, I gave up on sleep and went to my desk. My laptop was still open, the email still waiting. I read through the additional details Nut had sent—a more comprehensive brief, example images from previous tour photography, a preliminary contract with blank spaces where dates and compensation would be filled in.

It was a good offer. Better than good. The kind of opportunity that didn't come around twice, that other photographers would fight for, that could transform everything about my career.

I thought about what Dr. Siriporn had said: You're allowed to want things. The question is whether you can want them without losing yourself.

But what did it mean to want things without losing yourself when the things you wanted were mutually exclusive? When choosing one path meant closing another? This wasn't about losing myself in someone else—this was about fundamental questions of priority, of values, of what kind of life I wanted to build.

If I took the job, I'd be gone for three months. Three months during which the exhibition would end, during which William's house would continue its transformation, during which whatever we were building would have to survive on text messages and phone calls across time zones.

Could it survive that?

Could we survive that—this fragile not-quite-relationship that hadn't even been named yet?

And if it couldn't—if the distance proved too much, if the connection faded without regular nurturing—would I regret choosing the dream over the potential?

Or would I regret choosing a maybe over a certainty?

The questions spiraled, each one leading to three more, until my head was spinning with possibilities and my chest was tight with anxiety. This wasn't supposed to be

how it worked. I'd done the therapy, learned the lessons, practiced the skills. I was supposed to know how to handle difficult decisions by now. But knowing how to handle something wasn't the same as actually handling it. Theory and practice, as always, were different things.

I closed my laptop and walked to the window.

Bangkok spread out below me, its lights scattered across the darkness like fallen stars. Somewhere out there, William was probably sleeping—or not sleeping, given his history with insomnia. Maybe he was lying awake too, staring at his ceiling, thinking about gardens and seedlings and things that might grow if given the chance.

Some things are resilient like that.

I had three weeks to decide.

Three weeks to figure out what I wanted, who I wanted to be, whether I could have the dream and the connection or whether I'd have to choose.

Three weeks.

It felt like forever.

It felt like no time at all.

When morning finally came, I felt like I hadn't slept at all—which was technically accurate, since I'd spent most of the night wrestling with questions I couldn't answer.

The resurrection plant caught the early light from my window, its green leaves reaching upward with their usual determination. Beside it, the painting of my hands seemed to glow in the gentle illumination—William's gift, his attention made visible.

My phone buzzed.

William: The seedlings survived the night.

William: [Image attached]

I opened the attachment and found myself smiling despite everything—despite the sleepless night, the impossible decision, the weight sitting on my chest. The photo showed the row of small pots we'd arranged on the porch, each one intact, the soil dark and moist from the evening's watering.

Est: Victory number one.

William: Cautious optimism. We haven't seen actual growth yet.

Est: Give it time.

William: I'm trying. Time and I have a complicated relationship.

Est: I understand that more than you know.

I set down the phone and looked around my apartment—at the camera equipment waiting for the day's work, at the laptop with its unopened email, at the space I'd built during months of recovery.

Lego's voice echoed in my memory: Sometimes people really do change, P'Est. Sometimes the second version is worth knowing.

Dr. Siriporn: You're allowed to want things. The question is whether you can want them without losing yourself.

And my own realization, sitting in Tui's studio: Maybe the difference between growth and pattern isn't about the actions themselves—it's about the awareness you bring to them.

I was aware now. Painfully, exhaustingly aware—of what I wanted, of what I risked, of the multiple paths spreading out before me. I couldn't pretend I didn't know what I was doing or why I was doing it.

The only question was which path to take.

I had three weeks.

Three weeks of exhibition visits and garden updates and conversations that felt like building something. Three weeks of deciding whether what we were building was strong enough to survive distance, or whether I was willing to let it go for the chance to become who I'd always imagined I could be.

Three weeks to choose.

I picked up my camera and checked the settings, falling into the familiar routine of preparation. Whatever else happened, I had work to do today—the ongoing documentation of "Absence & Light," the professional responsibilities I'd committed to, the life that continued regardless of internal crisis. And maybe that was the answer. Not the final answer, not the complete one, but a piece of it.

You kept going. You did the work. You showed up to the things you'd committed to, even when everything else was uncertain.

You planted seeds and waited to see what grew.

And sometimes—sometimes—the waiting was its own kind of choice. The decision

not to decide yet, to let things unfold, to see what resilience really looked like when tested.

Some things are resilient like that.

I hoped we were.

I hoped I was.

My phone buzzed again as I was heading out the door.

William: I was thinking about what you said yesterday. About starting small.

William: So I started small this morning. Made tea instead of coffee. Sat in the garden for fifteen minutes before the contractors arrived. Looked at the frangipani tree and tried to see what my mother saw when she planted it.

William: I don't know if I found anything. But I tried. That has to count for something.

I stood in my doorway, camera bag over my shoulder, and let the words wash over me.

Est: It counts for everything.

William: Does it?

Est: Trying is the whole thing, William. The rest is just... waiting to see what grows.

A pause. Then:

William: You're very wise for someone who drinks terrible convenience store coffee.

Est: The coffee enhances my wisdom. Scientific fact.

William: I'm choosing to believe you.

Est: Good. That's the first step.

William: Toward what?

Est: I'll let you know when I figure it out.

I locked my apartment door and headed toward the elevator, carrying the weight of the secret I hadn't shared—the opportunity waiting in my inbox, the decision I had three weeks to make.

It wasn't fair to keep it from him. I knew that. But I also knew that I couldn't tell him until I understood my own feelings, until I knew what I wanted to say.

For now, I would keep showing up. Keep photographing the exhibition. Keep visiting the garden and watching the seedlings and building whatever it was we were building. And somewhere in the next three weeks, I would figure out whether I was strong enough to choose both paths—or whether choosing would mean losing one of them forever.

The elevator doors closed, and I descended toward the street, toward the day, toward all the unknown things still waiting to unfold.